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SUBJECT: TURKISH PERFORMERS WOW ARMENIAN AUDIENCE

Summary

¶11. The Turkish folk group Kardes Turkuler and the Armenian Sayat Nova Choir, both from Istanbul, gave a moving performance at the Yerevan opera house as part of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation "Music Bridge" project funded by USAID. Playing to a full hall, the groups sang to traditional instruments playing old and new compositions of mostly Armenian, Turkish and some Kurdish songs. The Armenian group sang in Turkish and the Turkish group in Armenian. The reception by the Armenian public and press was positive. Such cross border initiatives serve to dispel the feelings of fear and mistrust still harbored by many Armenians towards their Turkish neighbors. End Summary.

A PROGRAM DESIGNED FOR AN ARMENIAN AUDIENCE

¶12. The Ambassador introduced the two groups, emphasizing the interaction between the two cultures throughout history. The performance began with "Oh, Hayots Ashkhar" (Oh, World of Armenia). Songs by Armenian composers such as Komitas and Sayat Nova followed. The crowd became increasingly involved with the music as the program proceeded. There was a pleasing buzz of excitement during intermission and our Armenian guests, such as Deputy Foreign Minister Kirakossian, commented favorably on the choice of music and the quality of the performance.

¶13. The second part of the program opened with a film clip of the recently assassinated Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, explaining his efforts to reconcile the Armenian and Turkish communities in Istanbul. This was followed by a new composition inspired by Dink's last article, "They don't kill pigeons in my country," which was introduced by the composer/conductor in an emotional speech that eulogized Dink and all he stood for. Another piece on the traditional Armenian flute, the duduk, was dedicated to "brother Dink". At the end of his solo, the duduk player declared that "until his last breath, his duduk would always play for peace." The audience was so intensely focused during this part of the performance, one could hear a pin drop.

¶14. In contrast, by the end of the performance, people were dancing in the aisles. The groups received a standing ovation and calls for an encore performance. The event received favorable coverage in the Armenian press. The Turkish press was also there to interview the Ambassador among others.

¶15. Apparently, bringing Turkish musicians to perform in Armenia is more controversial than bringing Turkish football players. Both President Serzh Sargsian and Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian declined to attend; the Deputy Foreign Minister, who had been very helpful in eliminating problems along the way, only agreed to attend after the Ambassador called him personally. Nevertheless, the performance was received well in Armenia and we have not heard any criticism. Armine Hovannisian, wife of prominent opposition politician Raffi Hovannisian, described her conflicted feelings while attending the performance in an article entitled "Plea to My Turkish Friends" published in the Turkish Daily News. Post believes that events like this are important in helping to dispel the misperceptions and instinctive fears that many Armenians still feel regarding their neighbors across the border to the west.

Yovanovitch